

Humans Apart From Nature? Wilderness Experience and the Wilderness Act

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Abstract—Wilderness managers are faced with making judgments about the appropriateness of different types of recreational activities. One of the criteria they use is wilderness dependence—the notion that an activity should be allowed, or privileged if rationing is required, if it depends on a wilderness setting for much of its value. Inherent in this concept is the idea that much of the value of wilderness experience lies in an integration of humans and nature. But the very idea of a modern integrative wilderness experience has recently been attacked by critics, in part based on recent trends in wilderness recreation. Participants in both contemplative and interactive recreation report experiences that belie this critique, suggesting that opportunities for communion with nature are indeed inherent in the wilderness experience. Managing for both types of experiences may therefore be appropriate under the auspices of the Wilderness Act.

Introduction

Man is a fugitive from nature. He escaped from it and began to make history, which is trying to realize the imaginary, the improbable, perhaps the impossible. History is always made against the grain of Nature. The human being tries to rest from the enormous discomfort an all-embracing disquiet of history by “returning” transitorily, artificially, to Nature in the sport of hunting. We are such paradoxical creatures that each day will require greater artifice to give us the pleasure of sometimes being “natural beings.” But no matter how great and ingenious the artifice may be, it will be in vain if that ferocious instinct, already evanescent, is completely eroded in our species.

Jose Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Hunting* (1995)

The nature of the wilderness experience has changed through time, yet through the arc of this evolution certain themes have remained. The Wilderness Act is considered a distillation of the wilderness idea, but it represents only a point on this arc. This paper examines a contentious question: Do wilderness experiences reinforce the notion that humans are a part of nature, or do they in fact increase our alienation from the natural world?

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In particular, how is this question answered for the different types of wilderness recreation that have evolved over the last one hundred years? What was the intent of the framers of the Wilderness Act on this issue and how should that intention be reflected in management of wilderness experience?

The Deconstructionist Critique

In the last twenty years a great deal of thought has been devoted to what has come to be known as the “deconstructionist critique” of the wilderness idea. Without revisiting most of that well trodden ground, it is worth considering at least one aspect of the critique that touches on wilderness experience. The deconstructionists save some of their strongest criticism for the phrase of the Wilderness Act which states that wilderness is a place “where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Callicott (1991), for instance, states that “this definition assumes, indeed it enshrines, a bifurcation of man and nature,” while Cronon (1995) states that the “central paradox” of wilderness is that it “embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural... by definition wilderness leaves no place for human beings, save perhaps as contemplative sojourners enjoying their leisurely reverie...” In short, the Wilderness Act definition is seen as divorcing humans from nature rather than considering them as a part of nature.

Yet even a cursory look at the intellectual and legislative history of the Wilderness Act shows that the intention of the Act was the opposite of this assertion. Howard Zahniser, who became the primary author of the Wilderness Act, wrote that “In brief, one might define wilderness in the qualitative sense as an area with a quality of wildness so little modified by human action as to impress its visitors with their relationships to other forms of life rather than their human prowess resulting from inventions and contrivances” and “We tend in our urban mechanized civilization to forget about the places of our origin, and the reality of our dependence upon other forms of life. In the wilderness we can perceive that” (U.S. Congressional Research Service 1949). A 1952 Sierra Club Bulletin article noted “Wilderness is not the only device to renew the man-earth contact but it is potentially one of the best because it allows us to go all the way back to man’s beginnings...” (Bradley 1952). Hubert Humphrey, the Senate sponsor of the wilderness bill, testified that he introduced the bill “so that 100 years from now somebody’s children may be able to take a canoe and portage up through these forests and commune with nature” (National Wilderness Preservation Act Hearings 1957b).

This sentiment is reflected in the first version of the wilderness bill introduced in the Senate, which defined wilderness as a place “where man himself *is a member of the natural community*, a wanderer who visits but does not remain and whose travels leave only trails” (U.S. Congress 1957). This language was simplified twice more, to the final version, fairly quickly. It is unlikely, however, that this simplification was a philosophical statement about humankind’s place in, or apart from, nature. The Wilderness Act is a law, not a comprehensive statement of philosophy, subject not only to political compromise but also legislative requirements. Laws must articulate a clear legal standard that the agencies can implement, so it is not surprising that a mandate that a visitor be “a member of the natural community” was excised from the definition.

Nor is it surprising that the “non-residence” clause remained in the Act. Sutter (2002) has chronicled how the rising ubiquity of the automobile and the attendant road building, settlement, and recreational development drove the modern wilderness movement. Indeed, one of the first manifestations of the movement was Arthur Carhart’s recommendation to the Forest Service to refuse a proposal for summer homes at Trapper’s Lake, Colorado, in 1919. This was just four years after the passage of the Term Occupancy Act, which authorized long term permits for summer homes in the National Forests through the Recreational Residence Program. This program peaked in the 1950s, as the Wilderness Act was starting its legislative journey.

The “visitor who does not remain” clause may also reflect the post war transition to the more modern form of wilderness recreation: the rise of modern backpacking. In the post war years there was significant discussion about recreational impacts to wilderness. The worst of these impacts were associated with long term camps where traditional, more primitive living skills were practiced. Backpacking is inherently more transient than a traditional camp: one is less likely to move when significant effort has been expended building lean-tos, cutting pine bough beds, building deadfall traps, and so on. The long term camp was seen as an unacceptable impact to wilderness character. Zahniser, for instance, wrote that “Campers who establish long term camps make an intense use beyond those who daily move their camps...” (U.S. Congressional Research Service 1949).

After the language in the definition of wilderness had been changed to its final version, the lead house sponsor, John Saylor, quoted Zahniser during a hearing on the wilderness bill:

“Deep down at the base of all our needs for wilderness is a profound, a fundamental need...essential to a true understanding of ourselves, our culture, our own natures, and our place in nature. This need is for areas of the earth within which we stand without our mechanisms that make us immediate masters over our environment—areas of wild nature in which we sense ourselves to be, what we are, dependent members of an interdependent community of living creatures that together derive their existence from the sun.”

In the same speech Saylor quotes Harvey Broome, one of the founders of the Wilderness Society in saying that one of the benefits of preserving wilderness is that “then, indeed,

will Thoreau’s Lord of Creation work as a member and not as a fumbling outsider—in the community of living things” (Wilderness Preservation System Hearings 1962).

The intent of the framers of the Act is clear. Wilderness experience should increase the feeling of unity with nature. Whether the legal language of the Act itself reflects that intention can be debated, but as Snyder (2007) points out, “We should not let the legislative definition (of wilderness) henceforth dominate our language.”

Contemplation, Engagement, and Wilderness Dependence

Part of the perception of wilderness as a divisive force between humans and nature may stem from more recent trends in wilderness recreation. Turner (2002) has traced how wilderness recreation has changed since the early part of the twentieth century. Traditional, more interactive forms of recreation, that often caused high impact, changed into the low impact, more contemplative ideal epitomized today by the Leave No Trace program. There is a tension between these two types of wilderness recreation which is beginning to assume greater prominence in management decisions. This tension is reflected in policy. National Park Service policy, for instance, encourages activities that “will promote enjoyment through a direct association with, interaction with, or relation to park resources” but “can be sustained without causing unacceptable impacts...” (National Park Service 2006, 8.2). As Leave No Trace practices have evolved, the range of “unacceptable impacts” has expanded, leaving some formerly acceptable activities marginalized. Questions about the appropriateness of both traditional and emerging recreational activities involve this distinction, so it is worth further consideration.

In particular, the question of wilderness dependence is assuming a more prominent role in these discussions. One of the basic principles in the standard text for wilderness management reads: “Whenever one or more uses conflict, the principle of dependency, that calls for favoring activities that depend the most on wilderness conditions, is used to resolve use conflicts and prevent overuse” (Hendee and others 1978). This principle is incorporated into policy, and has even been prominent in recent lawsuits over wilderness management (High Sierra Hikers v. Blackwell 2004; High Sierra Hikers v. Weingardt 2007). It is worth considering, then, how these two distinct types of wilderness recreation—activities that involve a material engagement with the landscape on the one hand, and activities that are primarily focused on a scenic, aesthetic, or contemplative appreciation of wilderness on the other—provide opportunities for a mental or spiritual integration with the wilderness landscape, thereby realizing the intention of the framers of the Act.

The Economic Experience

Turner (2002) describes the woodcraft movement at the turn of the century, epitomized by the Boy Scout Handbook

and Joe Knowle's return to the Maine woods. Woodcrafters lived off the land and a successful vacation required substantial knowledge of the natural world as well as skills and experience to comfortably live within it. It is essentially an economic relationship with the land, one that mimics the lives of those who lived in an earlier time. As Turner notes, the philosophy of this type of recreation flows from Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis through Aldo Leopold and into the Wilderness Act, and is embodied in the Act as "primitive and unconfined."

The Wilderness Act generally prohibits commercial enterprise but does not prohibit personal economic activity. Indeed, maintaining opportunities for hunting and fishing is repeatedly mentioned in the legislative history of the Act. Roggenbuck (2004) has examined the values of the primitive experience, noting that some of the benefits include "becoming a creature of the wild, or an ecological citizen." Turner describes how concerns about the impacts of overuse gradually transformed the typical wilderness experience from an economic relationship to a contemplative one. While hunting and fishing are still sanctioned in most areas, pine bough beds and lean-tos are illegal in most areas; and campfires, while still legal in many areas, are officially discouraged.

The deep, local, complex knowledge and skill inherent in native cultures is the paradigm for the concept of humans as part of nature. It is the ideal held by the deconstructionists when they dismiss modern, interactive economic wilderness visitors as "elite urban tourists and wealthy sportsmen" who "project their leisure-time frontier fantasies onto the American landscape" (Cronon 1995). The economic wilderness experience more closely mimics this paradigm than other types of recreation. The literature of hunting and fishing certainly suggests an integration of humans and nature. Ortega y Gasset (1995), for instance, says that "by hunting man succeeds, in effect, in annihilating all historical evolution, in separating himself from the present, and in renewing the primitive situation." Leopold (1966) states that hunting "reminds us of our dependency on the soil-plant-animal-man food chain, and of the fundamental organization of the biota." A more recent example comes from Nelson (1989):

"Living from wild nature joins me with the island as no disconnected love ever could. The earth and sea flow in my blood; the free wind breathes through me; the clear sky gazes out from within my eyes. These eyes that see the island are also made from it; and the heart that loves the island has something of the island's heart inside."

It is unfortunate that the demands of an increasing population mean that some higher impact economic wilderness experiences are now prohibited or discouraged in order to protect biological values. The adoption of Leave No Trace principles is entirely appropriate given the recreational demand in many wilderness areas. But managers should not disregard the Act's mandate for primitive recreation. Rather, they should allow such uses in areas where low visitation and a resilient ecosystem may allow them without unacceptable levels of impact.

Risk and Adventure

There is another category of interactive experience which James Morton Turner does not mention. As the woodcraft movement was starting to fade, in the 1930s, specialized forms of wilderness adventure, such as rock climbing, river running, and Nordic skiing became more popular. After World War II, the widespread availability of more sophisticated equipment, such as surplus rubber rafts and nylon ropes, and easy access to distant wilderness via the modern highway system, led to both greater popularity of these sports and to more challenging adventures. These trends have continued as these sports evolved. More sophisticated equipment and easy access have led to increasing numbers of participants and higher technical levels of achievement.

These activities have a number of qualities in common. Most involve substantial risk. While they are not an economic activity, the consequences of failure are severe, which produces intense mental and emotional engagement with the landscape. They require an intimate knowledge of at least a portion of the environment—the ability to read a section of whitewater, estimate the difficulty and hazards of different climbing routes, or understand likely avalanche hazards and crevasse patterns on a high mountain ski traverse. To participate with a reasonable degree of safety at a high level, they demand a long apprenticeship involving increasing levels of difficulty.

These types of recreation are sometimes criticized as being mere thrill seeking, more appropriate to a playground than to wilderness. Because of the level of risk taking and athleticism required at the higher levels of these sports, some assume that they are not wilderness dependent—that there can be little connection to nature because the focus on the physical achievement is so involving. But the participants in these activities often make the opposite assertion, that it is the very level of risk and commitment that produces an intimate connection with the natural world. Consider this passage about the seventh day of a demanding rock climb:

"We now felt at home. Bivouacking in hammocks was completely natural. Nothing felt strange about our vertical world. With more receptive senses we now appreciated everything around us. Each individual crystal in the granite stood out in bold relief. The varied shapes of the clouds never ceased to attract our attention. For the first time we noticed tiny bugs that were all over the walls, so tiny they were barely noticeable. While belaying, I stared at one for 15 minutes, watching him move and admiring his brilliant red color. How could one ever be bored with so many good things to see and feel! This unity with our joyous surroundings, this ultra-penetrating perception gave us a feeling of contentment that we had not had for years" (Chouinard 1966).

Robinson (1996) reflects on this passage in his essay *The Climber as Visionary*, where he notes:

"Chouinard's vision was no accident. It was the result of days of climbing. He was tempered by technical difficulties, pain, apprehension, dehydration, striving, the sensory desert, weariness, the gradual loss of self. It is a system. You need only copy the ingredients and commit yourself to them. They lead to the door. It is not

necessary to attain to Chouinard's technical level—few can or do—only his degree of commitment.”

Presumably, “unity with our joyous surroundings” is possible whether the commitment is launching a kayak into a tricky rapid, turning a pair of skis down a steep gully, or persevering on a difficult climb.

Athleticism

Wilderness activities that involve a high degree of athleticism are often singled out as either inappropriate or not wilderness dependent. Almost every traditional wilderness form of recreation has a small minority of participants who are interested in speed or extreme difficulty. Trail running, speed ascents, and speed hiking are all variations on this theme. The quest for ultimate difficulty, often but not always including significant risk, is another variation.

These athletic activities share many of the elements noted by Robinson (1996), as well as a Zen-like element that can produce a transcendent experience. Again, some who participate in these forms of wilderness recreation claim that the very athleticism of the activity fosters a connection to nature. Consider this blogger: “Running like a wild man or woman through the woods nurtures the soul. Trail running satisfies a primal need for movement through nature” (Frazier n.d.). Or consider this writer, describing adventure running:

“...you find personal challenge where self-reliance is essential and the participant becomes intimate with nature... I used to think rushing through climbs precluded experiencing such things as the sunrise and sunset, sleeping under the stars, and fully appreciating the scenery... The rush I get from adventure running is similar to a “runner’s high” generated after a good race or training session, but it is also much more. The sentiment is tough to precisely describe, but it is a feeling of freedom and inner contentment, a refuge from the complexities and worries of society, and an experience of the beauty of nature in its purest form” (Pantilat 2008).

Another trail runner writes that:

“Trail running makes me think that the same might be true of our minds embrace of this earth: lungs alive, billowing in and out with the very substance of the sky, trading atmospheric gases with every tree and all the green grasses, our arms and legs alive in a million-year-old motion coded to make us feel fleet, and also make us feel happy and right when we fly along” (Duane 2011).

Formal competitions in wilderness are prohibited by policy (National Park Service 2006 6.4.5; U.S.D.A. Forest Service 2007, 2323.13h). Yet informal competitions or breaking speed records have the same emphasis on athletic achievement. Of course, an individual competing against themselves or others looks the same as a person going fast or hard for the joy of it. And appearances are key to many of the objections to such activities. National Park Service policy states that “unacceptable impacts are impacts that, individually or cumulatively, would...unreasonably interfere with the atmosphere of peace and tranquility ...in wilderness...” (National Park Service

2006, 8.2) Does that include the whoops and hollers of rafters going through big waves or a pair of rock climbers yelling belay signals? What if the yells come from thirty pairs of climbers and what about visual “interference”?

Part of the complaint about interactive wilderness recreation is that the participants are a distraction; they interfere with the contemplative experience. Both traditional and emerging interactive wilderness activities are often very visible. Upper Yosemite Falls is in designated wilderness and is a popular destination for both day hikers and backpackers. Rock climbers can frequently be seen performing a spectacular Tyrolean traverse from the summit of Lost Arrow Spire back to the rim of Yosemite Valley. Other non-traditional activities have been practiced here in recent years, including tightrope walking from the spire to the rim and across the front of the falls (Jenkins 2011). A vertical dance troupe has performed on the wall to the side of the falls (Rudolph 2000). In other parts of the valley, climbers have purposely taken enormous falls onto climbing ropes. Hang gliders soar over the walls (taking off and landing in non-wilderness) on weekends. At what point does this become a circus-like atmosphere? How many people need to be engaged in these sports before they “unreasonably interfere with the atmosphere of peace and tranquility?”

A number of societal trends have increased the perception that such sports are focused more on achievement than any kind of communion with nature. These include the media fascination with highly contrived “extreme” sports, the ease of publicizing one’s exploits in the digital age, the growing popularity of “collecting” summits or whitewater descents or hikes of iconic trails (the “bucket list” phenomenon), and the sponsorship of leading outdoor athletes by gear companies, which motivates the athletes to stay in the public’s eye by performing ever more “extreme” feats. These factors can lead to a perception of superficiality, egoism, and commercialism.

Sax (1980) notes that both Frederick Law Olmsted and Aldo Leopold discussed the distinction between recreation and achievement—a distinction between activities performed for one’s own satisfaction in a natural setting versus those performed for others. Sax goes on to say, in the context of National Parks, that:

“The attitudes associated with an activity may be more important than either the activity itself or its setting. To the extent that we infuse the parks with symbolic meaning by the way in which we use them, the symbolism attached to particular uses itself becomes the critical factor in the meaning that parks have for us.”

Most of these types of recreation may be technically legal under the Wilderness Act (although there is certainly room for argument) and the participants are likely to claim that it makes them feel like a part of nature—that the wilderness setting is integral to the experience. The anecdotes noted above make it clear that the opportunity for such integration is inherent in these activities. Wilderness dependence, in these cases, is in the head of the participant, which is a place where wilderness managers in most cases cannot and should not go. The attitudes, perceived or real, of the minority operating at the extremes of risk, athleticism, or publicity for a given wilderness activity

should not taint the manager's perception of the appropriateness of that activity as a whole.

Managers should be careful about jumping to conclusions about the wilderness dependence of a new activity. The primary factors for assessing a new activity should include not only the amount of physical impact, but also a careful analysis of legality under the section 4 (c) prohibitions of the Wilderness Act and the potential for conflict with other wilderness visitors. The determination of section 4 (c) legality is not always easy, as the lengthy debates over *structure*, *installation*, and *mechanized* have demonstrated. In many cases conflict between activity types can be minimized because the more athletic or adventurous activities are temporally or spatially separate from contemplative activities. When such activities do overlap, social science may help understand the degree of conflict or disruption that is likely.

The Contemplative Experience

The roots of the aesthetic, contemplative experience of wilderness go back to Muir, Emerson, and beyond. While all wilderness travel, being non-mechanized, is in some way physically demanding, the emphasis in this type of experience is on appreciation of scenery and immersion in a natural environment. The rise of the minimum impact ethic has led to the majority of wilderness visitors having little economic or material engagement with the landscape. This has led critics to charge that these experiences are inherently superficial and that wilderness divorces humans from nature.

Vale (1999), in *The Myth of the Humanized Landscape*, persuasively refutes these charges, giving a dozen examples, from historic to modern, of wilderness visitors "for whom the wild landscape, through all the senses, is intimately known and emotively valued." Vale concludes with the observation that:

"The failure to recognize such reactions stigmatizes unfairly contemporary people, leaving the wilderness landscape forever removed from intimate human knowledge and warmth, leaving the wilderness visitor 'a person who does not belong, a stranger in Paradise.'" (Solnit 1992) Such omission creates a stereotype no more valid than that of the uncaring savage: For at least some, perhaps many, Americans, even those lacking an Indian heritage, wilderness is a part of home."

The Modern Context

Howard Zahniser, primary author of the Wilderness Act, said that "'Wilderness' is a term that has significance because of the things that it negates" (National Wilderness Preservation Act Hearings 1957a). This is key to understanding the intent of the Act. Wilderness does not negate human presence or economic activities like hunting, fishing, or gathering, or the history or economic uses of previous residents of the land: According to Zahniser, wilderness areas "are samples of the natural world without the influence of *modern man*" (U.S. Congressional Research Service 1949, emphasis added). It does negate modernity—specifically, it negates "mechanized and

related aspects of the urban, industrial life to which modern man is increasingly confined" (U.S. Congressional Research Service 1949) and "the inventions, the contrivances whereby men have seemed to establish among themselves an independence of nature" (Zahniser 1957). In the Act itself, wilderness is defined as a place "in contrast with those areas where man and his works *dominate* the landscape..." (emphasis added). The goal of the Act was to stop that domination on the few tiny remnants of the American landscape that were still largely unmodified by such tools—in short, to stop the bulldozers.

This context seems to be missing from the deconstructionist critique. When asking the question of whether a wilderness experience causes visitors to perceive themselves as a part of nature or separate from nature, the relevant point of comparison is not the physical, mental, and spiritual integration of Native Americans living in their home landscape. Rather it is the modern American, whose alienation from nature continues to increase. The relevant question is not whether today's wilderness experiences can match the authentic integration with nature embodied by native cultures, but rather whether modern experiences, however "transitory" and "artificial", can reduce our alienation from nature by providing a meaningful, innate sense of our true place within nature. The wilderness experience, both interactive and contemplative, can decrease such alienation by providing an environment without "inventions and contrivances," and therefore enable visitors to feel more a part of nature than they would without such experiences.

Every component of modernity that the Wilderness Act was intended to "negate" has increased in scope and intensity in the years since the Act was passed. Population has exploded; the destruction of natural systems has accelerated; commercialism is all pervasive; self-reliance has been reduced by a hyper-connected and specialized society; and our lives are more urbanized, frenetic, and insulated from nature than ever before. In short, the need for wilderness experiences is greater than ever.

Restraint

There is another benefit to the wilderness experience that is sometimes overlooked in the debate over integration and dependence. All wilderness recreation involves ethical restraint. Such restraint not only preserves the wilderness for the future, it also provides a higher level of satisfaction to the visitor. As Sax (1980) writes:

"Such recreation tests the will to dominate and the inclination to submissiveness, and repays their transcendence with profound gratification. Plainly such activities are not limited by any specific forms. They range from the purely contemplative wanderer in the woods who, like Thoreau or John Muir, has the capacity to detach himself from social convention and structured activity, to the agile climber arduously working his way to the meaning of the summit."

The Leave No Trace, minimum impact approach thus reinforces the humility and restraint that Leopold, Zahniser, and others identified as central to the concept of wilderness.

More importantly, it provides an opportunity for the visitor to understand the values of ethical behavior, both to the natural world and to his or her own gratification. These lessons can then be carried over to everyday life. This is what Zahniser (1957) called “the *distinctive* ministrations of wilderness to modern man.”

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